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Imaging the Feminine during the Migration Period on the Territory of the Central Balkans: Transferring Ideas and Ideals

Abstract

Events and changes that happened during the Migration Period affected the demographic image of the Central Balkans and shaped cross-cultural communications between the people who used to live there with those who arrived. Also, religious transformations were reflected in visual culture of the time with all shifts that resulted with new or revisited concepts of former ideas and ideals. The aim of this paper is to research ways of how these historical circumstances and religious transitions influenced images of women, primarily from the Roman cultural milieu in this region; namely ideas and ideals of their self-representation.

Keywords: *image, women, migration, ideas, ideals, Central Balkans*

Introduction

Just as migrations of people were affected by historical circumstances, so too these migrations shaped the cultural history of regions. The territory of the Central Balkans is one of these regions in which the geographic position of the main ancient crossroads led toward the encountering of various peoples, their heritages, beliefs, ideas and ideals. Very well known historical events that occurred within the region generated migrations that affected changes within the society which was based upon the strong Roman heritage.

Since the second half of the 4th century barbarian tribes had been threatened the Danubian limes and Hunic penetration in 441 led to the devastation of major urban centres within the Central Balkan territory.¹ The presence of the Goths in the army and their settlement in Pannonia marked the new ethnic element in an already heterogeneous Roman state.² A brief restoration of the former glory of the Empire during the reign of the emperor Justinian was marked with the renovation of urban

1 В. Поповић, Јужнодунавске провинције у касној антици од краја 4. до средине 5. века, in: *Sirmium: grad careva i mučenika*, ed. Д. Познановић, Sremska Mitrovica 2003, 201-237.

2 More on the topic in: Н. Зечевић, *Византија и Готи на Балкану у IV и V веку*, Belgrade 2002.

centres, but already at the end of the 6th and in the 7th century an Avarian and Slavic onslaught signified the end of the Roman domination of this territory.³

Migrations that appeared due to this historical background affected the demographic image of the Central Balkans region, but migrations of ideas and ideals that occurred owing to the cross-cultural communication influenced personal beliefs, customs and images, both iconic and mental ones, that have survived as testimonies of these transitions. Images of Roman women from the Central Balkan territory can also be interpreted as testimonies of these various influences and they correspond with religious and cultural changes as well.

Migrating Ideas and Ideals in Female Imagery

Migrations with an impact on cross-cultural interchanges already occurred during the reign of the Severian dynasty when the population of Eastern origin became present in the army and inhabited major urban centres of the *Moesia Superior*. These ethnic changes led to the appearance of religious syncretism, which was noticeable in funerary rites, epigraphic inscriptions, icons or funerary goods.⁴ Traces of Eastern influences and the possible ethnicity of people from this region are noticeable on the site "Pećine" from Viminacium, where the sarcophagus of the mummified woman was discovered, dated to late 3rd or the first half of the 4th century; an exceptional example on the territory of the Central Balkans.⁵ Mummification suggests the Egyptian origin of the deceased woman and presumes her to be a follower of the Isis cult, although there are not so many preserved sculptures of this goddess in the region. Discovered artefacts from her sarcophagus, which include textile fragments with the golden embroidery, veil or net, leather shoes, earrings with rubies and various hairpins, suggest the importance of these objects in the female comprehension of fashion, as well as the significance as status symbols. On the other hand, these female accessories, aside from the fact that they were

3 М. Мирковић, *Централне балканске области у доба позног Царства*, in: *Историја српског народа, прва књига*, ed. Д. Срејовић, Ј. Ковачевић at al., Belgrade 1981, 89-105; Ј. Ковачевић, *Досељавање Словена на Балканско полуострво*, in: *Историја српског народа, прва књига*, ed. Д. Срејовић, Ј. Ковачевић at al., Belgrade 1981, 109-124.

4 Љ. Зотовић, *Јужне некрополе Виминацијума, Виминацијум 1* (1986), 41-59; Р. Марић, *Антички култови у нашој земљи*, Belgrade 1933, 105-119; Д. Спасић-Бурић, *Виминацијум, главни град*, Pozarevac 2002, 167, 184-185; id., *Град Виминацијум*, Pozarevac 2015, 95-97, 100-103.

5 Д. Спасић-Бурић, *Мумија из Виминацијума, Viminacium 13-14* (2003), 59-86.

part of woman's everyday life and important for creation of her mental image within the concept of afterlife, also were present within the female imagery in various artistic media.¹

One of the most representative examples of the use of these fashion-status symbols can be seen on the portrait of a deceased lady from the "Pagan tomb" from Viminacium, dated in the middle of the 4th century (fig. 1).² This portrait is a typical representation of a noble woman who wished to be remembered in the majesty of her social status as well as beauty. On the one hand she is represented with all signs that a dignified matron had; a festive position, a fashionable hairstyle with a net, valuable jewellery and an ornamentally decorated collar of her tunica as well as the golden embroidery of her palla.³ This image represents the ideal of a Roman matron and all of the motifs and symbols in the tomb suggest her mistress's role within the idea of the afterlife, but according to some of the painted motifs that coincide with the abovementioned funerary goods and stylistic characteristics of the fresco decoration, her ethnic origin can be related to the East.⁴ The ideal of beauty and ideas about the beautification in the lives of Roman women were very important and on this portrait highlighted with the highest artistic standards, as well as a finely modelled glass bottle in the lady's hand (one can note the suggestion of the function of *balsamaria*.) Most probably this isolated symbol can be related to the scene of mistress's toilette known from the Silistra tomb or Projecta's casket.⁵ Sometimes this scene of female beautification is well developed or it could be simplified with a couple of main attributes, such as *balsamaria*. The basic idea of beautification rests on the

1 Cf. I. Popović, Jewelry on the Representations of the Deceased Women, in: *Funerary Sculpture of the Western Illyricum and Neighbouring Regions of the Roman Empire*, eds. N. Cambi and G. Koch, Split 2012, 541-556; J. Anđelković Grašar, Funerary Images of Women in Tomb Frescos of the Late Antique and Early Byzantine period from the Central Balkans, in: *The Danubian Lands between the Black, Aegean and Adriatic Seas (7th Century BC - 10th Century AD)*, ed. G. R. Tsetskhladze, A. Avram and J. Hargrave, Oxford 2015, 269-275.

2 M. Korać, Late Roman Tomb with Frescoes from Viminacium, *Starinar* 42 (1991), 107-122; id., *Slikarstvo Viminacijuma*, Belgrade 2007, 69-100.

3 J. Anđelković Grašar, *Funerary Images of Women in Tomb Frescos*, 270-272; J. Anđelković Grašar, M. Tapavički-Ilić, Mural Painting of a Roman Lady from Viminacium: From Roman Matron to the Modern Icon, *Exarc Journal Digest* 2 (2015) 17-19; online: <http://journal.exarc.net/issue-2015-2/int/mural-painting-roman-lady-viminacium-roman-matron-modern-icon>

4 M. Korać, *Slikarstvo Viminacijuma*, 117; Д. Спасић-Бурић, Град Виминацијум, 115.

5 G. Atanasov, Late Antique Tomb in Durostorum - Silistra and its Master, *Pontica* 40 (2007), 447-468; H. Danov, T. Ivanov, *The Silistra tomb, Antique tombs in Bulgaria*, Sofia 1980, 105-121; J. Elsner, Visualising Women in Late Antique Rome: The Projecta Casket, in: *Through a Glass Brightly: Festschrift for David Buckton*, ed., C. Entwistle, Oxford 2003, 22-36.

idea of the goddess Venus's toilette as it can be seen on Projecta's casket. In funerary art this mythological ideal can be associated with the goddess Venus only indirectly, through the use of funerary goods that could contain shells or mother of pearls, or even motifs of Cupids that could indicate the cult of *Venus Funerariae*, as well as many of objects associated with the woman beautification, such as mirrors which were often decorated with the motif of goddess Aphrodite/Venus.⁶

Objects that were painted as part of the misstresses toilette or funerary banquet, especially those associated with a woman's beautification or her noble status are also present as funerary goods. Among them can be recognized fibulae, jewelry, hair pins, bottles, mirrors, balsamaria, suggesting the idea that motifs that were painted within the tombs decorations, actually were present in the earthly life of the deceased women, pointing to the idea that these women wished to be remembered in the glorious appearance even within the atmosphere of their *domus aeterna*.⁷

The idea of beauty and ideal of beautification over time migrated from Roman to early Byzantine society and the lives of women, even when ideals of exemplary Christian life were subordinated to modesty. The attitude of early Christians toward these Roman-pagan ideals was ambivalent. The ideal of portrait as remembrance of the ancestors as well as the highest way of self representation, self promotion, memory associated with the apotheosis in one moment was abandoned and a deceased woman, together with the three deceased men was buried in the "Christian tomb" from Viminacium, where the Christ monogram was placed on the western wall of the tomb, once dedicated for portraits of deceased persons.⁸ These Christians clearly abandoned the earlier pagan view of death and afterlife, and wished to be identified and remembered by the idea of resurrection that was glorified under the main Christian symbol. On the other hand, a woman buried within the lead sarchopagus (G 2047)

6 A. Јовановић, Култ *Venus Funerariae* у Горњој Мезији, *Зборник Народног музеја у Нишу* 9 (2000), 11-19; М. Тапавићи-Илић, Ј. Анђелковић Грашар, Symbol as Key to the Question of Roman Woman's Afterlife, *Acta Musei Caransebesiensis, Tibiscum, Caransebes* 3 (2013), 65-85; В. Милоновић, М. Митић, I. Косановић, New Find of Lead Mirror Frames from Rit (Viminacium), *Arheologija i prirodne nauke* 11 (2016), 9-22.

7 М. Тапавићи-Илић, Ј. Анђелковић Грашар, Symbol as Key, 74-75.

8 Ј. Анђелковић Грашар, Е. Никوليћ, Д. Роговић, "Tomb with Cupids" from Viminacium: a Contribution to Research of Construction, Iconography and Style, *Starinar* 63 (2013), 82-83; М. Кораћ, *Slikarstvo Viminacijuma*, 259-260.

from the western area of the central part of the three conch memoria at "Pećine" site from Viminacium, suggests the early Christian funerary practice from the middle of the 4th century.⁹ Rich funerary material that includes fragmented textile made of purple brocade and golden embroidery, leather shoes, golden necklace, silver needle used as fibulae, glass *balsamaria* and a small wooden spindle, suggest the Eastern origin of the deceased and the notion that early Christian women were not ready to abandon some pagan practices that easily, especially those associated with ideas and ideals of beauty.¹⁰

Among the funerary goods, wedding rings testified to the most intimate act in a woman's life – marriage. This idea of marriage as one of the most important events in a woman's life was the ideal ever known and ever present in woman's history. The Christian church took over the Roman wedding custom with very little changes, with the main things left such as the signing of the wedding agreement and the act of shaking hands over the dowry. The art associated with this act also inherited most of the Roman patterns but was assimilated to the Christian ideas, thus the scene *dextrarum iunctio* (fig. 2), sometimes had some Christian symbol or acclamation, such as *vivas in deo*, signifying the sacred institution of marriage.¹¹ By the 4th century this type of ring was common in the West, and from there it came to Byzantium, while the examples from the Central Balkans were in use between the end of the 3rd and middle of the 4th century.¹² Since the marriage was the means of achieving another ideal – maternity, women were represented with their husbands, as wives prepared for their future role. Being a woman meant achieving this biologically predominated role.

Images of women represented as mothers within the family portraits are known from objects of everyday use. Even when Christian messages were incorporated into the image such as an invocation *vivas in deo* on the glass bottom from Prahovo (*Aquae*), the woman within this family portrait is depicted with all of the designations of status symbols and with the ideals of

9 Љ. Зотовић, Рано хришћанство у Виминацијуму кроз изворе и археолошке споменике, *Viminacium* 8-9, (1994), 61-62.

10 Д. Спасић-Ђурић, *Град Виминацијум*, 112-113.

11 G. Vikan, Art and Marriage in Early Byzantium, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990), 145-163; И. Поповић, *Касноантички и рановизантијски накит од злата у Народном музеју у Београду*, Belgrade 2001, 30.

12 *Ibid.*, 26-29, кат. 6, 7, 8, 20, сл. 2; Д. Спасић, Једна гробна целина из Виминацијума, *Гласник Српског археолошког друштва* 12 (1996), 103-104, Т. ½, Сл. 2, 2а.

beauty of a Roman matron (fig. 3).¹³ On the fragmented brick from Caričin Grad, the depiction of the family portrait is schematized and all the figures are depicted in the *orans* position. In the Christian centre such as Caričin Grad, the main ideal of the faithful was expressed with the hands upraised toward the heavens, while within the ideal of family portraiture the image of a woman was simplified with a linear drawing closer to the schematic drawing (fig. 4). In such a picture, only traces of what was once important for the female self representation were visible: long hair and decorative dress just determined this woman in her gender role, while all other lines (for instance of face or body) are the same for all three figures.¹⁴ As can be seen in these few examples the ideals of marriage and later maternity were of greatest importance for ordinary woman, and not only for them, but for empresses too. Religious changes influenced female lifestyles and thus their images were subordinated to the new Christian ideals. For Christians two figures were the most important ideals for this image: the Theotokos and the mother of the first Christian emperor Constantine, Helena.

According to what is said, feminine images served the aim of their memory as respectable wives and thus mothers. And that is visible by the funerary goods, as well as portraits in their fresco decorated tombs.

For an ordinary noble woman, who aspired to represent herself in the majesty of her social role, it was necessary to create the most exemplary image that followed the highest role model of the time – an empress. Imitation was the imperative. In order to imitate this ideal women used patterns of successful representation, a profile or an en face solemn image, a hairstyle with buns, wreaths, nets, diadems, decorative dress, jewellery, anything that could be a status symbol. All of these marks are noticeable on cameos with the female idealized representations and sometimes it is very hard to distinguish these images as standardized representations of empresses or their imitations (fig. 5).¹⁵ Aspirations toward the ideal of the empress image that at a certain point became the desirable type of image for feminine representations, continued to be dominant in the 5th and 6th centuries. These standardized images are known from the objects of everyday use or

13 J. Ранков, Касноантичко стаклено дно рађено у техници fondo d'oro, *Зборник Народног музеја у Београду* 11/1 (1983) 85-89, 85; J. Кондић, *Римски царски градови и палате*, кат. 131.

14 В. Кондић, В. Поповић, *Царичин Град*, Belgrade 1977, 188, Т. IV, 5; М. Јерemiћ, *Briques et tuiles*, 90, Fig. I, 42a.

15 I. Popović, Roman Cameos with Representation of Female Bust from Middle and Lower Danube, *Glyptique romaine, Pallas. Revue d'études antiques* 83 (2010), 203-224.

jewelry.¹⁶ They are characterized by an en face portrait and schematically rendered face features, as well as the spiritual look dominated with accentuated eyes, strait hair falling down to the level of the ears, in an overall impression much more similar to masks than the human faces, as can be seen on the oil lamp from Pontes (fig. 6).¹⁷ What has been left from the previous glory of idealized but far more realistic image can be recognized in traces of jewellery, decorative dress or fashionable hairstyle, as can be seen on the bone plaque of pyxis from Caričin Grad, on the image that appears as the most simplified and stylized ideal of an empress (fig. 7).¹⁸

At the end it should be said that women of non Roman origin appeared as a strong factor in the acculturation of barbaric tribes into Roman society during the Migration Period when people of the highest rank of German origin adopted the Roman way of clothing fashion as their wish to represent themselves equal to the Roman aristocracy. Grave goods from the female grave from Ulpiana as well as jewellery from the National Museum of Belgrade testify to this tendencies.¹⁹

Conclusion

As a conclusion it can be stated that female images from the 4th to 6th centuries represent the continuity of Roman ideals of fashion and beauty, sometimes achieved in the best artistic manner, sometimes as a fair reflection of a glorious ancient past. In the 6th century when the Roman state restored previous borders and thus the glory of the past, female images became again more frequent prominent, but much more represented as stylized and standardized versions of the ancient models. Owing to the historical circumstances it is expected that in the 5th century images of women of Roman origin lack in production, since the artistic centres were located in the cities which were mostly destroyed. But on the other hand, foreign elements that arrived into the culture of this region showed that even women of German origin aspired toward the look of an empress, and not just any empress, but the Byzantine one.

16 И. Поповић, *Камеје из касноантичке збирке Народног музеја у Београду*, Belgrade 1989, 403.

17 S. Petković, M. Tapavički-Ilić, J. Anđelković Grašar, A Portrait Oil Lamp from Pontes – Possible Interpretations and Meanings within Early Byzantine Visual Culture, *Starinar* 65 (2015), 79-89.

18 В. Кондић, В. Поповић, *Царичин Град*, 188, Т. III, сл. 2.

19 И. Поповић, *Касноантички и рановизантијски накит 64-65, 98*, кат. 75; М. Милинковић, тзв. Женском германском гробу из Улпијане, in: *Споменица Јована Ковачевића*, eds. Ж. Микић and Р. Бунардић, 143-177; id. Археологија моде као археологија идентитета - неколико примера, *Ниш и Византија* 2 (2003), 185-196.



Fig. 1: Portrait of the lady from the "Pagan tomb" from Viminacium (documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)



Fig. 2: Wedding ring from the National Museum of Belgrade (after: Константин Велики и Милански едикт 313, 2013, cat. 41)



Fig. 3: Glass bottom from Prahovo (Aquae), National Museum Belgrade (source: <http://www.narodnimuzej.rs/event/konstantin-veliki-i-milanski-edikt-313-radjan-je-hriscanstva-u-rimskim-provincijama-na-tlu-srbije-2/>, accessed 20.09.2013)



Fig. 4: Fragmented brick from Caričin Grad (documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)



Fig. 5: Medallion with cameo from Remesiana, National Museum Belgrade (after: Константин Велики и Милански едикт 313, 2013, cat. 50)

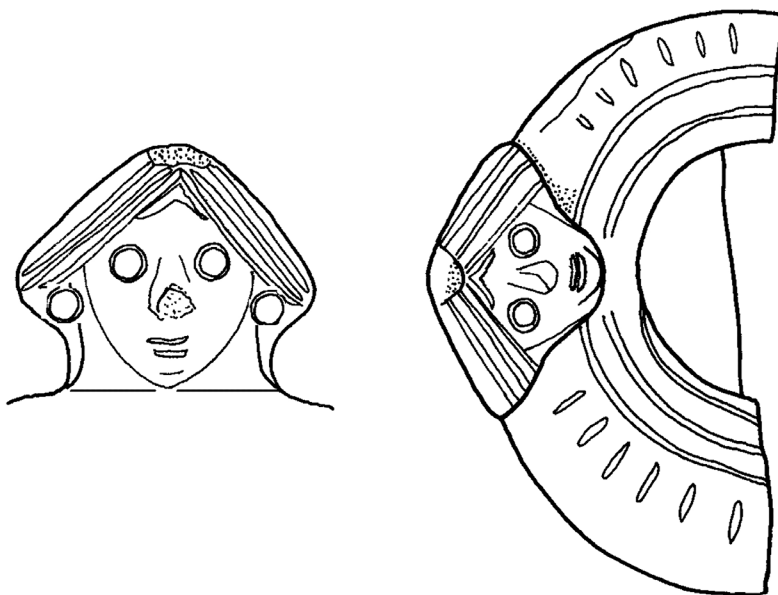


Fig. 6: Oil lamp from Pontes (drawing: M. Tapavički-Ilić)



Fig. 7: Bone plaque of pyxis from Caričin Grad (documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)